In Gerrit T-3 (no date) 1954 AVI Kashmir AVI

—the Raja's guest house. To sit on the lawns before this and watch the glorious changing of colours in the surrounding hills brought about by the setting sun, is a fitting finish to a good day's sport or a long trek, as in the air fresh and clear you listen to stories told of the day's play with rod and gun, for there is good fishing in the river and plenty of game on the slopes above.

Poonch is renowned for its bear hunts, its Rajas have always been the keenest of sportsmen, and seldom has a season passed in which there have not been at least two bear drives in each of which "honks", as they are called, forty or fifty bears have been shot, for they abound in the dense forest slopes round about. The shikaris of Kashmir insist that great numbers of black bears migrate in the autumn to Poonch where there is little if any snowfall during the winter.

Whereas the red bears of Gilgit spend the winter's hibernation in a cave, the black bears of Kashmir, where the mountain slopes are covered with firs, pines and other great trees, find a hollow tree trunk for those months of rest.

Unlike the red bear, which shikaris declare to be a more or less harmless creature only killing what he needs for his own food, the clumsy, rapacious black bear does an enormous amount of damage, killing off hundreds of young pine trees by ripping away the bark to get at the gum which exudes and of which he is as passionately fond as of honey, or by eating or trampling down fields of Indian corn—another favourite of his—destroying in a night sufficient to provide a poor peasant family for the whole season.

When the corn is ripening the farmers do their best to protect the crop from bears which invade it at that time; it is on the Indian corn that they fatten for the winter. Fires are lighted, the smoke drifting across the field; bears dislike this since they cannot get the sniff of a hunter through the smoke. In the middle of the field a small platform called a *machan* is built and on this sits a guard, his job being to scare the bears away when they come—they always feed at night. He blows horns, throws stones, or by pulling a long string rattles a can with stones in it, the can being tied to a tree or pole which may be a hundred yards away from him. But he is usually too

2: Gervis T-3 (no date) 1984 AVI Kashmir AVI

scared to come down from his perch to frighten the bear away; what is more, the bear knows this, and so feeds away happily in the long corn until the dawn, when it makes for the forests, there to hide up and sleep during the daylight hours.

His liking for meat is said to be acquired, hunters of a century ago speaking of meat-eating black bears as one now would of a man-eating tiger, but in these days the black bear is a bullock killer. It has been said that this desire for meat was first brought about when a cattle disease killed off many of the buffaloes; bears came across the bodies of the dead animals, tasted them, and took a liking for beef. In any case, since the bear is a killer of the cow—an animal sacred to the Hindu—a Raja would feel perfectly justified in despatching the bear.

It was whilst stopping in the guest house that I learnt a lot about bears, most of it from the head shikari to the Raja, the man who collected together hundreds of beaters for each of the hunts. It was from him that I learnt that bears breed once a year, the litter usually being two cubs, which remain with their mother for a year, going into hibernation with her for the winter during December, and remaining in the hollow tree stump until March, when, although they have no wish to go, the mother bear awakens and pushes them out into the snow to fend for themselves. She then returns to her bed, and within a few days the new litter is born. As is only to be expected after a mother bear has slept for over three months, her offsprings are pathetic little creatures with bodies which are almost hairless; it seems impossible that they can survive, let alone grow into great black bears which can bring down a full grown bullock.

For yet another month she remains in the tree stump, and when she finally stumbles out she is thin and weak; her limbs are stiff, so that the first day she only moves around for exercise, perhaps to chew on an old bone as the life comes back into her gums.

Very slowly she wears her cubs to the sunlight, she is herself not too strong, very different from the great fat mother bear which went into hibernation four months earlier, and she is now feeding her babies. Their first solid food is a few nibbles